

16 April 1985

ARTICLE APPEARED
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OPINION

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Lessons from Vietnam

FOR those who have made a study of the Vietnam war the lessons to be learned from it are clear. Today's question is whether the managers of American affairs in Washington are aware of the lessons and will remember them long enough.

The first lesson, well understood and practiced by great imperial powers of the past (including both Romans and British), is that you do not use conscripts from the homeland in colonial wars. Such wars must be fought with only volunteers from home, using local levies for the fighting as much as possible.

The reason is obvious. The mass of the population never understands or accepts the necessity of a remote colonial war. The mass is not ready to accept sacrifices for such a war. If the war can't be managed by volunteers from home leading or "advising" the locals, a warning flag should go up. Keep away.

A second military lesson is that the United States should never get involved in a land war in Asia against Asians. American generals knew this at the time of the Vietnam war. The top ones (Ridgway, MacArthur, Collins, Bradley) were consulted. They advised against what was done. President Lyndon B. Johnson ignored that advice.

The commitment of half a million American ground troops to land warfare in Asia against an Asiatic country was made by a political President for political reasons against the best judgment of the best professional military people in the country. This is an unsound way of getting into a war.

The most important lesson of all is that military operations of any kind should always be based on sound intelligence, which is then used in strategic planning. A corollary is that strategic planning should be based on a sound concept of how to use available means to achieve a desired end.

In the case of Lyndon Johnson's commitment of half a million American soldiers to the jungles of Southeast Asia, the desired end or purpose of the operation was clear enough. It was to prevent the spread of communism. But in selecting the means to that end the President and his top advisers failed to build the best existing intelligence information into their strategic planning.

Both the Central Intelligence Agency and the State Department knew by 1965 that a decisive break had occurred between the Soviet Union and China. As early as the winter of 1960 the Soviets had pulled all

their technicians out of China, by the trainload, taking along with them the blueprints of many an unfinished factory. Earlier, in 1958, the Chinese had asked the Soviets for nuclear weapons and nuclear knowledge and had been turned down. By 1965 there had been border "incidents" between Soviet and Chinese soldiers.

Sound American strategy at that time would have been to encourage and build on the break between China and Russia. The worst possible course would be to do anything that would delay the break.

Sound American strategy at that time (and today) also calls for balancing off the military power of the

Soviet Union. Any action that weakens the American weight in the military balance of power between America and Russia gives Moscow opportunities that it might decide to exploit.

The American commitment in Vietnam in March of 1965 violated sound strategy. It forced the Chinese and Soviets into joining in giving aid to North Vietnam. It delayed development of the break between Moscow and Peking.

It sucked the bulk of American military power into Southeast Asia and committed it to an eight-year war at a point far removed from the Soviet heartland.

The commitment in Vietnam dangerously weakened the American military presence in Europe and drained American arsenals the world around of weapons and ammunition. Nothing could have better served the Soviet interest at that time than major US military involvement on the far side of the world from Europe.

The wonder is that Moscow failed to take advantage of its best ever opportunity to push ahead in other parts of the world. From 1965 to 1973 the US was a hobbled giant, bogged down in a no-win situation in Southeast Asia while Moscow was free of any debilitating commitments.

There were other lessons. The main lessons are to enter a remote colonial war only if it serves the long-term national interest and then only with volunteers from the home country. Does Washington understand, and will it remember?